Grace Napolitano
1936–

UNITED STATES REPRESENTATIVE
DEMOCRAT FROM CALIFORNIA
1999–

Congressional Pictorial Directory
109th Congress

GRACIELA FLORES NAPOLITANO ENTERED COMMUNITY POLITICS in the 1980s, built wide name recognition as a city mayor and California assembly-woman, and won election to the U.S. House in 1998. In Washington, Congresswoman Napolitano has focused on clean water, mental health, and transportation and on securing federal dollars for her district.

Graciela Flores was born in Brownsville, Texas, on December 4, 1936, daughter of Miguel Flores and Maria Alicia (Ledezma) Flores. After graduating from Brownsville High School in 1954, she married Federico Musquiz and had five children: Yolanda, Federico, Edward, Miguel, and Cynthia. The family moved to southern California, where she continued her education at Cerritos College. In 1982, several years after her first husband passed away, she married California restaurateur Frank Napolitano. The two live in the Los Angeles suburb of Norwalk, in the same home she has maintained for more than 40 years, and take great pride in their 14 grandchildren and one great-grandson.

Napolitano worked for 13 years for the California Department of Employment before moving to a major automobile manufacturing company, where she spent 22 years, moving from executive secretary to its transportation division. In 1974, Napolitano was appointed a commissioner on the International Friendship Commission, a sister city program in which Norwalk was paired with the Mexican town of Hermosillo. The program focused on cultural exchanges between children and some adults, and the experience pulled Napolitano into public service.[1]

In 1986, Napolitano was first elected to the city council of Norwalk by a 28-vote margin. Four years later, she won her second term by the largest margin in city history. In 1989, Napolitano's council colleagues elevated her to mayor. In 1992, she was elected to the California assembly, where she served until 1998. There she emerged as a leader on international trade, environmental protection, transportation, and immigration issues. Napolitano earned a reputation as a hard worker and a champion of small business, women, economic expansion, and job creation. She chaired the women's caucus and established the first new standing committee in a decade, the international trade committee, and served as vice chair of the Latino caucus.

In 1998, upon the retirement of Congressman Esteban Torres, Napolitano entered the primary race to succeed him. She used $200,000 of her retirement funds and drew from the political base of her assembly district that encompassed much of the largely Hispanic, middle-class Democratic congressional district. She won the primary by 619 votes and captured the general election with 67 percent of the vote. Napolitano has been re-elected three times by margins of 70 percent or higher and ran unopposed in 2004 in her newly reapportioned district stretching from East Los Angeles to Pomona.[2]

Napolitano has served on the Resources and Small Business committees since entering the House in January 1999. In the 107th Congress (2001–2003), she won an additional post on the International Relations Committee and also was elevated to Ranking Member of the Resources Committee's Water and Power Subcommittee in the 108th Congress (2003–2005). Napolitano has moved rapidly into the leadership of the Congressional Hispanic Caucus and was unanimously selected its chair for a two-year term during the 109th Congress (2005–2007).[3] She also serves as co-chair of the Congressional Mental Health Caucus. Prompted to take action by a report showing that Latina teenagers have the highest suicide rate of any ethnic or racial group in the country, she launched school-based adolescent mental health counseling programs in three middle schools and one high school in her district. Napolitano is focused on the effect of posttraumatic stress disorder on U.S. troops and on the problem of seniors who suffer from depression.

Constituent services top Napolitano's congressional agenda. "As far as passing legislation, that is not the main reason I went to Washington," Napolitano said. "I want to be able to open the doors like I have at the county and state level."[4] Her projects benefitted small businesses that reside in her district—for example, her effort to reform the practice of "contract bundling," which favors large corporations. Napolitano, who once owned an Italian restaurant, also has helped minority business owners obtain financial assistance to expand their businesses by working with the Small Business Administration.

In her role on the Resources Committee, Napolitano worked with then-Energy Secretary Bill Richardson to direct the cleanup in Utah of 10 million tons of spent uranium tailings that leached into the Colorado River, the source of water supplied daily to the states of Utah, Nevada, Arizona, and one-third of southern California. She also has teamed with regional Members of Congress to help secure $65 million in federal funds to continue the cleanup of key Superfund sites in Los Angeles-area aquifers. In 2004, Napolitano helped achieve congressional approval of CALFED, a $395 million program aimed at increasing the state's water supply and protecting its fragile ecosystems.

FOR FURTHER READING

Biographical Directory of the U.S. Congress, "Grace F. Napolitano," http://bioguide.congress.gov

Polanco, Richard G. and Grace Napolitano, *Making Immigration Policy Work in the United States*. (Sacramento, CA: California Latino Legislative Caucus, 1993).

NOTES

1 *Politics in America, 2002* (Washington, D.C.: Congressional Quarterly Inc., 2001): 129.

2 "Election Statistics, 1920 to Present," http://clerk.house.gov/members/electionInfo/elections.html.

3 "Napolitano Selected to Lead Congressional Hispanic Caucus," 18 November 2004, available at http://www.napolitano.house.gov/press_releases/pr111804.htm (accessed 29 December 2004).

4 Norah M. O'Donnell, "The Votes Are In: After Battling Torres, Napolitano Claims His Seat," 15 June 1998, *Roll Call*.